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- 1 Nielsen, Ken. *Tony Kushner's Angels in America*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008. Pp. 136. ISBN 978-0-8264-9504-4
- 2 Ken Nielsen contributes to the series of theater study guides published by Continuum, offering a careful and detailed introduction to one of the most fervently discussed and widely produced American plays of recent years. Although not all critics would readily join their voices with Nielsen's in recognizing *Angels in America* as "the most important American play" (1) of the past two decades, few would question the usefulness of a guide designed to help students deal with a work as complicated in nature and ambitious in scope as Kushner's.
- 3 In the first part, the critic succeeds in placing the work in its socio-political and cultural background sufficiently enough. Nielsen provides readers with a concise yet entirely informative and thorough account of the social, political, cultural implications of the AIDS crisis in the U.S., during the 1980s. In a language that is simple and straightforward yet totally adequate in handling the material, the critic directs students to approach the work "against the backdrop of late Cold War society" (5), and read through the playwright's intention to "investigat[e] an American society plagued by egoism, consumerism, greed, AIDS [...], hypocrisy and loneliness as a vantage point from which to create an almost Brechtian parable about the very nature of the American nation" (5). Nielsen explains thoroughly the modes in which the play interrogates how the AIDS crisis in America of the 1980s affected private as well as public spheres of experience, noting that one of the work's major strengths "lies exactly in the combination of the personal with the political" (6). Taking into account carefully selected works of notable scholars and critics, Nielsen also exposes adequately and allows students to familiarize themselves generally with Kushner's polemics against "Reaganism" (11). In particular, the critic focuses on why and how the playwright succeeds in drawing parallels between the socio-cultural setting of the 1950s and McCarthyism, on the one hand, and Reaganism and the 1980s American politics on issues relating to "gay and queer visibility and civil rights" (16), on the other. In addition, Nielsen comments briefly but aptly on factors that led to the international success of the work, highlighting the "combination of a renewed

interest in America after the Cold War, the prevalence of American popular culture throughout the world and the immense theatrical qualities in the play itself" (4).

- 4 The second chapter starts off with a plot summary of the two parts, *Millenium Approaches* and *Perestroika*, comprising the work in question. In an almost telegraphic style, Nielsen recounts in simple, short sentences the line of action in both parts, allowing no room for textual analysis. Although this gesture on the part of the critic tends to oversimplify matters, on a different level it is rendered necessary, since students may often be in need of constant re-orientation while reading a play as episodic, long and complicated as *Angels in America* definitely is. Nielsen proceeds with a similarly simple yet revealing discussion of all characters, in both parts. In the case of Roy Cohn, he draws attention to the mode in which Kushner exploits productively features borrowed from an actual historical figure to endorse a process of "fictional construction" (44). The critic adequately informs the reader that Kushner's decision to discard "the traditional single protagonist furthers the play's critique of Western, and, particularly, American individualism" (38) and elaborates on how Roy Cohn ends up embodying the very "corrupted power structure of America" (44). Nielsen's discussion of the sources of influence Kushner is indebted to is equally informative. In particular, it is argued that Kushner is heir to both Tennessee Williams' "narrative American dramatic tradition" and Bertolt Brecht's "theories and practices" (52). In his close reading of key scenes of the play, the critic emphasizes the political efficacy of Kushner's interrogations. Nielsen opts for a balanced argumentative tone, and as a result, he does not shy away from bringing into play points made by critics who have questioned this particular quality of the playwright's preoccupations. Thus, in the section titled "Changing Views of the Play," he presents positions held by critics such as David Savran and Janelle Reinelt, who have examined extensively the play's "political ambiguity" (65), and establishes, even if for a short while, a critical debate with such voices.
- 5 It is precisely this exploration of the political efficacy of the play that also drives Nielsen's efforts in the third chapter, in which he offers a brief but complete production history of the play. He examines the results of both American and foreign productions and discusses the ways in which Kushner's socio-cultural and political inquiries were communicated on disparate occasions. Focusing, for example, on Danish and German productions, Nielsen discusses the reception of the play in relation to the general question of how America is commonly perceived as an idea in Europe. In particular, what is offered is a brief account of problems and issues arising when specific artistic endeavors get tested alongside as well as against widely shared European preconceptions about the U.S., its politics and culture. The chapter is concluded with yet another attempt at exploring the dynamics of Kushner's work, as the critic comments interestingly on why and how the political thrust of *Angels in America* was compromised in the 2003 HBO film adaptation, that served to make the play appear "smaller [but also] less political" (90).
- 6 The workshop exercises suggested by Nielsen, in the fourth chapter, are fuelled by the realization that *Angels in America* constitutes, in effect, an answer play (92). Quite appropriately the critic reminds his readers that the play developed out of the playwright's intense dissatisfaction with the results William Hoffman's *As Is* yielded in the 1980s. In Nielsen's terms, it is thus particularly useful and insightful for both students as well as professionals to take closely into account, in their possible approaches, the fact that this is a work delivered "not just *in* dialogue but also *as* a dialogue" (92, emphasis in original), and so, he carefully chooses exercises attuned to the special nature of the work.

Quite appropriately, Nielsen supplements the study guide with a thematically related socio-historical and cultural timeline, and a section of useful suggestions for further reading.

- 7 All in all, Nielsen comes up with a guide that can indeed prove of great help to students. It is also a book that may serve as a handy companion for professionals preparing productions that will follow in the long and substantial line of interpretations and realizations that Tony Kushner's work has already received.

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